

The Sturgis Wager

A DETECTIVE STORY

BY
EDGAR MORETTE

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Sprague. There is a homely but expressive adage concerning the danger of 'monkeying' with a buzz saw. Why, my dear friend, did you 'monkey' with Mr. Sturgis' buzz saw, instead of sticking to your palette and maulstick?

"But I fear I am growing garrulous, gentlemen. If I had time, I should like to explain to Mr. Sturgis the details of some of the more important, and, in my humble opinion, more brilliant schemes of which I have been the—ah—the promoter; for I dislike to be judged by the bungling operations which have so nearly caused me to lose this latest little game. But this cannot be. I shall have to continue to confide to the pages of my journal, as I have done for years, the interesting events of a life which I hope will some day, after my death, find their way in print to public favor. My dream has always been that some such man as Mr. Sturgis might ultimately edit these memoirs; but, alas, the fondest of human dreams are seldom destined to be realized.

"Now, then, gentlemen, before finally parting with you, I wish to honorably carry out the terms of my wager with Mr. Sturgis. I concede the fact that, to all intents and purposes, he has won the bet, and I authorize you, Mr. Sprague, as stakeholder, to pay him the amount I deposited with you. As I have already suggested, he has made some perhaps excusable mistakes; but, then, as he himself stated the other night, 'a detective has a lifetime in which to correct a blunder.' A lifetime! It is not in accordance with Mr. Sturgis' usual practice to use so vague a term. A lifetime is not necessarily a very long time, Mr. Sturgis."

"During this tirade Sturgis and Sprague had remained standing with their eyes fixed upon the gleaming carbuncles which peered at them from behind the grated periphery at the top of the stairs. The artist seemed to realize that the fight was lost. His attitude was that of a brave man accepting, with calm despair, an unpleasant but inevitable doom. The reporter had drawn his revolver at the first sound of Murdock's voice, but had immediately returned it to his pocket upon realizing that the chemist was protected by a bullet-proof grating. Now, pale and collected, he remained inscrutable. It was impossible, even for the sharp eyes of Murdock, to determine whether he was at last resigned to his fate, or whether his active mind was still on the alert for a loophole of escape.

The bit of candle which he held in his hand had burned so low that at last he was unable to hold it without risk of burning his fingers. Whereupon he coolly set it down upon the stone floor, where presently the wick fell over into a pool of molten paraffine, and the flame sputtered noisily, sending fitful gleams through the darkness.

"Well," continued Murdock's voice, "it is at any rate a great satisfaction to play a game with an adversary worthy of one's steel. You have played well, Mr. Sturgis. I think you would have won modestly; and you are losing as I would myself have lost, had our positions been reversed. Good-bye."

The gleaming eyes disappeared from the grating and the sliding panel closed with a metallic click.

"Now, then," said Sturgis to his companion, "the last chance lies in the speaking tube. But first help me move this box."

"What do you want to do with the box?" asked Sprague, who, however, did as he was bid.

"It may help us to gain a little time. Put it down here."

Sturgis struck a match and pointed out the spot.

"On the hot-air register?"

"On what looks like a hot-air register. Did you ever see a hot-air register with no apparent means of shutting off the heat?"

Sprague, who stood almost over the register, suddenly threw back his head and gasped for breath.

"You have discovered the secret of this death trap," said Sturgis, observing him.

"Gas!" spluttered the artist.

"Yes, he is going to asphyxiate us. Now, quick, to the speaking tube! The box will somewhat retard the rush of gas; but, at the best, it is only a question of minutes before the air becomes so charged as to render respiration impossible."

Sprague rushed to the speaking-tube and whistled long and loud, after which he placed his ear to the mouth-piece.

"I hear some one walking," he suddenly exclaimed.

The two men listened in breathless silence for an answering call.

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

gas and they were beginning to feel its effects.

"We can at least complete our task before we die," said Sturgis, with grim determination.

"Our task?"

"Yes, and insure Murdock's conviction for our murder."

"What chance is there that anyone will ever discover our bodies, since they are destined for Murdock's oblivion tank?"

"Give me your hand," Sturgis replied; "there is a box of matches. I place it here, between us, within easy reach. I want to write a few words to the superintendent of police to explain matters. By that time there will be enough gas in the room to produce a terrific explosion, when we strike a match. We can thus succeed in wrecking this place and calling attention to it. If I should succumb before you do, do not fail to light the match."

While he was speaking the reporter had taken from his pocket a pad and a pencil and had begun to write as rapidly as he could in the darkness.

Sprague's head was beginning to swim and his ears were ringing, but the thought of Agnes Murdock was uppermost in his mind.

"An explosion!" he exclaimed; "no, no; that must not be. What of Agnes? She may be hurt?"

Sturgis continued writing.

"It is the only chance there is of bringing Murdock to justice," he said, firmly.

"But Agnes is innocent of his crimes," urged the artist, in a thick voice. His tongue clove to his palate; he felt his consciousness ebbing.

"Why should she suffer? I am going, old man—I cannot hold out any longer—Promise me that you—that you will not—strike—the match—"

He staggered and fell against the reporter, who caught him in his arms. His own senses were reeling.

"Promise—" pleaded the half-unconscious man.

"I promise," answered Sturgis, after an instant's hesitation.

It struck a chill to his heart to see his friend dying in the prime of youth, strength and happiness.

Suddenly a thought flashed upon him.

"Brace up, old fellow. All is not yet over. The speaking-tube leads to fresh air. Here, put your lips to it and breathe through your mouth."

The artist heard the words and made an effort to obey these direc-



TOTTERED AND REELED.

tions. With Sturgis' assistance he managed to place his lips to the mouth-piece of the speaking-tube. A few whiffs of comparatively fresh air sent the sluggish blood coursing through his veins and gave him a new hold on life. With renewed vigor came the animal instinct to fight to the last for existence.

As the shadows of death which had been closing in upon him receded, he became conscious of Sturgis' voice beating upon his ears in broken and scarcely audible tones.

"It is—the last chance—Stick—to the tube—When he comes—surprise him—your revolver—shoot—before—"

The reporter was clinging unsteadily to his friend's shoulder. Sprague suddenly realized that Sturgis in his turn was succumbing to the effects of the gas. He sprang back in time to catch the staggering man in his arms.

"Selfish brute that I am!" he exclaimed. "Here, it is your turn to breathe!" And he pushed the reporter toward the tube.

"No, no," said Sturgis, struggling faintly; "it cannot be both—and you—have—everything—to live for."

But the artist was now the stronger, and he succeeded in forcing his friend to inhale enough fresh air to restore his departing consciousness.

At length Sturgis, with returning strength, was about to renew the generous struggle with Sprague, when suddenly the place was ablaze with the glow of an electric light.

"He wants to see if his work is done," whispered Sturgis, to his companion.

Then, observing that Sturgis was again on the verge of asphyxiation, he continued hurriedly:

"Fill up your lungs with air, quick!—quick, I tell you. Now drop and feign death. Do as I do."

Suiting the action to the word, Sturgis threw himself upon the stone floor, face downward, and lay motionless, his right hand grasping a revolver concealed beneath his body. Sprague, after a short breathing spell at the tube, followed his companion's example.

After a short interval there came a metallic click, which Sturgis recognized as the sound made by the opening of the slide in the panel of the door at the head of the stairs.

A moment—which seemed an eternity of suspense—followed, during which the prisoners felt, without being able to see, the cold gleam of the steady eyes of Murdock at the grating.

Would he enter? Would he suspect the ruse? Would the two men retain their grasp of consciousness and their strength long enough to make a last fight for life?

These thoughts crowded upon the reporter's brain as he lay simulating death and making a desperate effort to control his reeling senses.

If Murdock were coming he would have to shut off the gas and ventilate the room. What was he waiting for?

"Come in!"

The words were Murdock's as he turned away from the grating and closed the sliding panel.

"An interruption which probably means death to us," whispered Sturgis to his companion; "take another breath of fresh air, old fellow; we must hold out a little longer."

Sprague, however, lay motionless and unresponsive. The reporter shook him violently and turned him over upon his back. The artist's body was limp and inert; his eyes half closed; his face livid.

The reporter himself felt sick and faint. But, with a mighty effort, he succeeded in raising his friend in his arms, and dragging him toward the speaking-tube. There, of a sudden, his strength failed him. His head swam; his muscles relaxed; he felt Sprague's limp form slip from his grasp, tottered, reeled, threw his arms wildly about him for support, and fell, as the last elusive ray of consciousness was slipping away from him.

CHAPTER XXII.
FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

After Sprague had left her, Agnes, shaken by the conflicting emotions of the day, had gone to her room to rest and to prepare for the interview which she meant to have with her father on the subject of her lover and of Chatham.

Having received word that Murdock would remain in his study during the rest of the afternoon, she had taken time to reflect upon what she meant to say, and how she meant to say it. Her visit was not prompted by the desire of a daughter to confide the great happiness of her life to the loving sympathy of an affectionate parent; but Agnes was punctilious in the performance of what she considered to be her duties, great and small, and she counted it among those duties to obtain, or at any rate to seek, the paternal sanction of her choice of a husband.

Her knock at the door of Murdock's study was answered in the chemist's quiet voice:

"Come in."

As she opened the door, Murdock advanced to meet her. He seemed to come from the direction of the extension.

Miss Murdock sniffed the air.

"Isn't there a leak of gas?" she inquired.

"Yes," replied Murdock; "I have just stopped a leak in the laboratory. Won't you take a chair, Agnes?"

She felt his calm, searching glance upon her; and, in spite of her preparation, she grew embarrassed, as was her wont, in her father's presence.

"Did Mr. Chatham wait to see you this afternoon?" she asked, after a momentary silence.

Murdock observed her narrowly.

"Yes; Chatham has been here today. I did not know that you had seen him."

"I could not help seeing him; for he forced his way into the parlor, in spite of all the servants could do to prevent him."

An almost imperceptible furrow appeared between the chemist's eyes.

"Has he been annoying you with his attentions?"

The words were spoken in Murdock's usual tones; but Agnes saw something in her father's eyes and in the firm lines of his mouth which sent a cold shiver down her spine, and caused her pity to go out to the unfortunate young man who had offended her.

"Perhaps he is more to be pitied than blamed," she suggested, gently.

"My interview with him was certainly not pleasant; but I bear him no malice."

"Tell me about it," said Murdock, slowly.

Agnes gave her version of the visit, in which, instinctively, she softened, as much as possible, the passion and brutality displayed by the accountant.

Murdock listened in silence until she had quite finished. Then Agnes noticed that his right hand was clenched upon the arm of his chair with a force which caused the muscles to stand out in hard knots. She looked up into his face in sudden surprise.

His features gave no indication of what his feelings might be; and his voice, as usual, was steady and deliberate.

"I am sorry all this should have happened, Agnes. As I told you yesterday, I hoped to save you from this man's importunities. It cannot be helped now. But I think I made it clear to the gentleman that his atten-

tions are as distasteful to me as they are to you. As he seems to have told you, he has been obliged to leave the country—I understand that he has done something or other which makes it safer for him to undertake a long journey. At any rate, we are well rid of him for some time to come, and I think you need have no fear of further molestation."

"What did he mean by saying that he had had encouragement from you?" asked the young girl.

"I am sure I do not know. That was of course a lie out of whole cloth. He came to me with letters of recommendation from good friends of mine, and I therefore occasionally invited him to the house; but that is all the encouragement he ever got from me. We live in the United States and at the close of the nineteenth century the selection of a husband is no longer performed by a stern parent, but is left entirely to the young girl herself. That is certainly my way of looking at the matter. When you find the man of your choice, my only function will be to give you advice, if you seek it, and my best assistance in any event."

The turn of the conversation thus suddenly brought to the surface the topic which occupied the young girl's mind, to the exclusion of all others; and which, for that very reason, had been kept severely in the background up to that point.

Miss Mae Lair entertained the young people Saturday night with music, games and recitations. A delightful evening was spent and all vowed Miss Mae the queen of hostesses. Those present were:

Misses Lottie Britt, Minnie Starkey, Adelle Reed, Pearl Holden, Jessie Long, Myrtle Watts, Cummie Redfern, Omis Service.

Messrs. H. C. Taylor, E. J. Thompson, Bob Pippin, J. M. Redfern, John Barks, Dud Reed, Henry Long, Ollie Dunbar, Arthur Richardson.

Messrs. Julius Pletzsch and Frank Rogers, of Beverly, made The Stayer a brief call today.

We wish to say to our friends and patrons that we will discontinue giving trading stamps after April 1st. This will give all who have stamp books partly filled time to fill them up.

Very Respectfully,
Canyon Mercantile Co.

2

MISS MAE LAIR ENTERTAINED THE YOUNG PEOPLE SATURDAY NIGHT WITH MUSIC, GAMES AND RECITATIONS. A DELIGHTFUL EVENING WAS SPENT AND ALL VOWED MISS MAE THE QUEEN OF HOSTESSES. THOSE PRESENT WERE:

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MESSEURS H. C. TAYLOR, E. J. THOMPSON, BOB PIPPIN, J. M. REDFERN, JOHN BARKS, DUD REED, HENRY LONG, OLLIE DUNBAR, ARTHUR RICHARDSON.

MESSEURS JULIUS PLETZSCH AND FRANK ROGERS, OF BEVERLY, MADE THE STAYER A BRIEF CALL TODAY.

WE WISH TO SAY TO OUR FRIENDS AND PATRONS THAT WE WILL DISCONTINUE GIVING TRADING STAMPS AFTER APRIL 1ST. THIS WILL GIVE ALL WHO HAVE STAMP BOOKS PARTLY FILLED TIME TO FILL THEM UP.

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Mrs. J. E. Wansley has recovered from her recent illness. Mr. J. E. Wansley was taken very sick Tuesday with pneumonia. Mr. T. H. Wansley is dangerously ill with pneumonia.

We are requested to announce that a meeting conducted by all of the ministers of the city will begin on the third Sunday at the Methodist church. Mr. McDonald, of Silverton will lead the music. It will be a union meeting and all christians are requested to attend and do their best to make this a meeting that will be rich in blessings to Canyon City.

The Literary Department of the Epworth League met at the house of Rev. and Mrs. Stephens Friday evening February 28th.

The meeting was ably presided over by Mrs. Ernberger, the president of the Literary department.

The following program was rendered:

Prayer—Prof. Ernberger.

Quotations from Holmes—Members of League.

Biography of Holmes—Prof. Ernberger.

Instrumental Duet—Misses Smith and Hoffman.

Chambered Nautilus—Miss Wansley.

Stratford Fountain—Miss Redfern.

The Parson's Legacy—Miss Bensley.

Wonderful One-Hoss Shay—Miss Parker.

Current events—Rev. Wallace.

The next meeting will be at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. T. H. Wansley on the evening of the 14th inst.

THE BARBER

Makes a specialty of fashionable haircuts, smooth shaves and clean shampoos.

Shop next door to restaurant.

For Sale.

16 head of good 5 and 6 year old mules, well broken and in good shape. Also a lot of three year old.

Address, Wm. Ward, Fanchon, Texas.

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